

The second decade of the *Kansas City District*



By Eric Cramer

World Events

1918

- ~The U.S. Congress establishes time zones and approves daylight saving time
- ~World War I ends

1919

- ~Einstein's theory of general relativity is tested/confirmed
- ~The U.S. Congress approves the 19th Amendment to the United States Constitution, which would guarantee suffrage to women, and sends it to the U.S. states for ratification.

1920

- ~Prohibition begins in the United States
- ~The first game of the Negro National League baseball is played

1921

- ~Communist Party of China is officially founded
- ~During an Armistice Day ceremony at Arlington National Cemetery, the Tomb of the Unknown is dedicated by President Warren G. Harding.

1922

- ~First successful insulin treatment of diabetes occurred
- ~The British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) begins radio service in the United Kingdom.

1923

- ~*Time Magazine* hits newsstands for the first time.
- ~The Walt Disney Company is founded

1924

- ~Great fire in London harbor occurred
- ~The 1924 Winter Olympics open in France, inaugurating the Winter Olympic Games.

1925

- ~The Chrysler Corporation is founded by Walter Percy Chrysler.
- ~Charles Jenkins achieves the first synchronized transmission of pictures and sound

1926

- ~Gertrude Ederle becomes the first woman to swim the English Channel from France to England
- ~U.S. Route 66 was established.

1927

- ~The first transatlantic telephone call was placed from New York City to London
- ~The Great Mississippi Flood affects 700,000 people in the greatest national disaster in US history

The riverboat Molly B, seen in 1959, shows the evolution of the movement of freight on the Missouri River following the days of the paddlewheel steamboats. Creating a navigational channel on the Missouri River was the primary mission of the Kansas City District in its early years. Photo provided

It is said March “comes in like a lion and goes out like a lamb,” and much the same can be said about operations in the Kansas City District during the 1920s.

The beginning of the period was a time when many national interests were opposed to further development on the river, and many defense resources had been reduced in support of World War I.

In 1918, the federal government had commandeered the Missouri fleet of boats and barges to support the war effort on the Mississippi River, which was seen as a better river “highway” than the Missouri.

As result of these and many other factors, the river’s navigational channel deteriorated. According to “Soundings-100 years of the Missouri River Navigation Project” by John Ferrell, only 35 percent of the proposed six-foot-deep channel project was complete by 1921. The Kansas City District could only report a dependable (low water) depth of 4.5 feet on its improved area downstream of Kansas City.

At a nationwide level, interest in navigation on the Missouri River was at a low point. It was an area where the commander of the Kansas City District disagreed with local political interests. The commander, Maj. Gilbert Wilkes recommended suspending all work on the river except maintenance.

The political organization known as the Mississippi Valley Association didn’t agree, and was successful in

gaining \$1.2 million appropriated in 1923. Work on restoring the channel in the lower reach of the river began again.

By 1925, a new local organization devoted to river navigation had formed.

The Missouri River Navigation Association held a Missouri River Improvement Conference in October 1925. Its keynote speaker was future president Herbert Hoover, who was then serving as the Secretary of Commerce. Hoover may have been readying for the presidential campaign which saw him elected in 1932. During his visit to Kansas City, he also addressed an association of carbonated beverage bottlers and met with Walter Simpson Dickey, owner of the Kansas City Journal-Post newspaper, according to his daily appointment calendar for 1925.

Hoover told the convention his vision of the Missouri River included a nine-foot-deep navigational channel extending to Sioux City, Iowa.

Hoover wasn’t the only prominent citizen involved with the Missouri River Navigation Association. Its vice president was real estate magnate J.C. Nichols, famous for founding Kansas City’s Country Club Plaza shopping district.

By 1926, the Kansas City District’s new commander, Maj. Cleveland C. Gee, recommended a plan based on a four-year study by the district. His plan said the six-foot channel to Sioux City was possible, and he recommended a six-foot channel at least to Omaha, Neb. Gen. Harry Taylor, chief of engineers, rejected the project as economically unjustifiable.

Congress preferred a revised version of the more ambitious plan outlined by Hoover, authoring the extension of the navigation channel to Sioux City and appropriating \$12 million for the project. The method to provide the channel was the same originally proposed in the 1880s by Maj. Charles Suter of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers—forcing the river to scour its own channels by positioning structures to both guide the current and to trap silt.

Despite this input, traffic on the river waned throughout the 1920s, going out “like a lamb.” By the next, Depression-wracked decade, the river was little used for navigation. The project did not reach its uniform depth goals for almost 20 years.



The Silver Bow, a “St. Louis and Omaha packet,” (meaning a freight ship that moved between St. Louis and Omaha) is an example of the Missouri River’s freight traffic in the 19th and early 20th centuries. Political leaders felt maintaining such traffic offered competition to railroads and ensured lower prices for farmers shipping grain. Photo provided

Editor’s note: Figures used in this article are taken from the book “Soundings – 100 years of the Missouri River Navigation Project” by John Ferrell.